4-1-2003

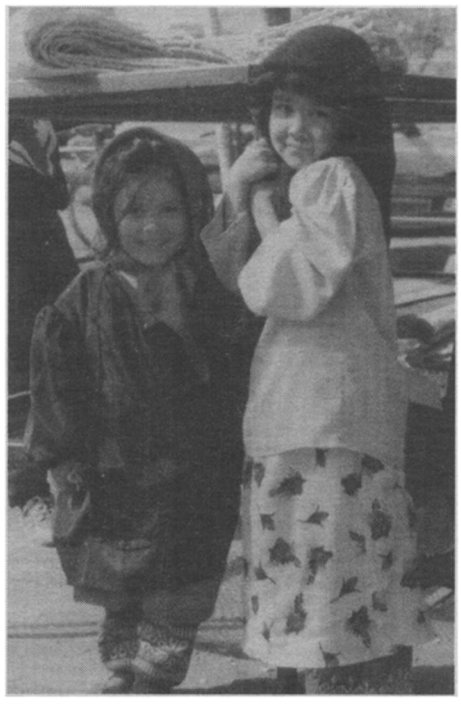
# The View From The Couch

Jeanne Marecek
*Swarthmore College*, jmarece1@swarthmore.edu



## Recommended Citation

Jeanne Marecek. (2003). "The View From The Couch". *Women's Review Of Books*. Volume 20, Issue 7. 11-12. DOI: 10.2307/4024175
https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/272



**Afghan refugee children in Kashan. From *Inside Iran.***

ber of the Women's Society of Islamic Republic, [which is] headed by Khomeini's daughter." "With her close links to the ruling establishment," Howard observes, "Rakeie was typical of the kind of women who have figured in politics since the revolution." Although Iran's first Human Development Report (1999) "lists twenty-three laws and regulations enacted after 1979 to protect women's rights," including "laws paving the way for the reintroduction of birth control and amendments to the laws on divorce, custody, widows' pensions, and employment," Howard notes that "critics say successive parliaments have rarely given women's rights priority or tackled issues head on."

Howard's narrative culminates in a discussion of the complicated and often contradictory lives of foreign "nomads," which for better or worse have become entangled with those of the Iranian men whom they married. These non-Iranian women often find themselves caught in webs of kinship relations and traditional expectations that they cannot quite comprehend. Howard highlights the pain and joy of those Euro-Americans who live in Iran with their husbands. Some, like Jane (not the author), who opened a highly successful restaurant with her husband in Kashan (an ancient city at the edge of Iran's great Salt Desert), preferred to stay in Iran because of the "kids." Jane liked "the people here, they are very kind, very nice and very polite." But others have suffered, particularly those who have married into religious families. Anna, a devout Roman Catholic who escaped from Hungary at the time of the 1956 uprising, described her anxiety to Howard in the aftermath of her hysterectomy: "While her husband nursed her throughout her illness and manfully looked after the children, her in-laws pressured her to get a divorce, the implication being that she was now 'damaged goods.'"

Howard does not give the same attention to the lives of non-European wives of Iranian men. She highlights a gathering of foreign women converts in Qom, where an articulate black American Muslim woman organized an annual meeting in memory of Malcolm X and challenged the masculinist monopoly on martyrdom. One would have liked to hear about how such women engaged issues of kinship and patriarchy in Iran.

But overall, Howard's readers come away better informed about the society and women of Iran, carrying with them stories about the lives of a wide range of individuals and the structural limitations of a culture. I enjoyed reading her book and highly recommend it.

# The view from the couch

*by Jeanne Marecek*

**The Thief of Happiness: The Story of an Extraordinary Psychotherapy** by Bonnie Friedman. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002, 274 pp., $24.00 hardcover, $16.00 paper.

In Bonnie Friedman's memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows what Freud called the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis: communicate everything that comes to mind. Do not exclude any idea because it is too disagreeable, indiscreet, irrelevant, or nonsensical. *The Thief of Happiness* includes interchanges with her pseudonymous psychoanalyst Dr. Harriet Sing, a pastiche of childhood remembrances, assorted musings about love and life, and feverish fantasies. Friedman reports sundry details of meals, shopping trips, phone conversations and household chores. She puts readers in the position of the psychoanalyst who must locate what Freud called "precious metal" buried in the "many tons of ore" that free association produces. Those who prefer stories with discernible plots will throw up their hands. But there is method to Friedman's madness: although she risks sounding self-indulgent, there is no more truthful way to tell a psychoanalysis.

As in most varieties of psychodynamic therapy, transference—the emotionally charged relationship between therapist and patient—was the pivot of the therapy. Dr. Sing was remote, austere and sparing in her words. Apart from her wardrobe—blue skirts, starched white blouses and riding boots—Friedman knew little about her. This left ample room for her unconscious to run free, which is precisely the effect Sing intended. Friedman was instantly propelled into an intense infatuation: "Little mattered now besides Harriet Sing. Everyone else was merely metaphoric." Sing encouraged this absorption: "If I say I felt lonely, she responds, 'You felt lonely for me,' and I know she's right. A journalist…writes me a flirtatious letter and I compose a flirtatious reply. 'Don't send it to him,' she advises. 'It's meant for me.'"

As the years wore on, Friedman's feelings for Dr. Sing grew more complicated and volatile, careening from slavish admiration to resentment to disillusionment. Nonetheless, she remained besotted. Even when Friedman came to see Sing as the "thief of happiness," the psychoanalyst's hold remained tenacious and the attachment difficult to sever.

In the century since Freud proposed transference love, psychoanalysts have reconceived it in a number of ways. Transference is now broadly construed to encompass the full range of emotions that come into play in self-other relationships inside and outside therapy. Many analysts now understand it not only as the residue of early childhood but also as continually reshaped through daily living. Many theorists no longer focus narrowly on the patient's emotional baggage: instead they view the therapist-patient relationship as an emergent process in which both psyches mutually influence each other.

Friedman's notions of transference, in contrast, hew closely to Freud's early formulations. She portrays her years in treatment as a time when mysterious forces gripped her psychic life. Like tornadoes, they seemed to touch down without warning. They took their toll on her marriage, friendships, psychic equilibrium and even physical health, while she felt powerless to curb them. Then, unaccountably, the forces dissipated. Friedman seems to find the gains she made in psychoanalysis equally mysterious and unwilled. She says, for example, "[T]o my surprise, I turned into a person who could think judiciously." In her eyes, psychoanalysis is akin to witchcraft, and she sums up the experience as a "supremely useful…spiritual apprenticeship." But attributing so much power to psychoanalysis keeps her from crediting her own agency.

Readers may well ask what actually did happen in Friedman's therapy. Did she change because of her therapy or in spite of it? Her writer's block—the problem for which she entered therapy—dissipated in two weeks. Why did she stay in therapy for seven additional years? Was analysis a trap that sidetracked her from productive and healthy living? Or did it ultimately enable her to write, live zestfully and rekindle a humdrum marriage? These questions have no easy answers. This is why scientifically-minded practitioners (and cost-conscious managed-care companies) are wary of psychoanalysis.

Some will read *The Thief of Happiness* as a story of self-discovery, spiritual growth and healing. Others will read it as a grim tale of humbuggery. At one point, Friedman herself pronounces Dr. Sing a humbug—the "Great Gatsby of Psychoanalysis," the "Wizard of Oz." Was Dr. Sing brilliant or inept? Was she deluded by her own theories? Was she just fleecing her patient? Friedman poses these questions, but adroitly sidesteps their answers, leaving them for the reader to ponder. Psychoanalysis, after all, implies that reality is never what it appears to be.

I must underscore that Friedman's encounter with psychotherapy was not at all typical. Even among psychoanalysts, the orthodox form that Dr. Sing espoused has been on the wane for several decades. To keep an individual, especially one who had no significant clinical psychopathology, in treatment for seven years is a dubious practice. And the aloof stance that Sing assumed has largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman's telling, Sing's pronouncements are often stagey and her interpretations cryptic. Indeed, her remarks sometimes sound like a parody of therapeutic arrogance. One example: Friedman worried that if she deferred getting pregnant until treatment was

over, she might be too old to conceive. "Have you and Paul considered adoption?" Sing responded.

It's difficult to see what Friedman offers to a feminist audience. *The Thief of Happiness* is a book about relationships among women—Friedman and her mother, sister, girlfriends and therapist. Friedman's difficulties with ambition, envy, achievement, self-deprecation and invisibility all have gendered dimensions. But she does not draw on gender as a framework for understanding her experiences. Nor, evidently, was feminism a part of the social worlds she moved in.

Dr. Sing, it seems, slept through feminism. Many feminist therapists will take issue with the book jacket's claim that this offers "a portrait of...what good therapy is like." According to Friedman, Sing created a therapist-client relationship in which a hierarchy of power and authority prevailed. She scrupulously avoided self-disclosure, fostered a cult-like atmosphere of specialness and encouraged Friedman's emotional dependency. She refused to bend her therapeutic practices to accommodate practical realities. Some years into therapy, Friedman moved from Massachusetts to southern Connecticut, now four hours from Sing's office. Yet when she raised the question of changing to another therapist, Sing's response was swift and succinct: "Switching therapists is like switching mothers." When Friedman broached the topic of termination ("When will you ever let me leave?"), Sing said, "Your very restlessness is a sign that you have more work to do."

Lovers of language may relish Friedman's poetic sensibility. Her prose overflows with lush word-pictures and glittery imagery. When the language works, the effect is incandescent. Consider this admiring description of her sister's handwriting: "a parade of characters tumbling across the page, her plump lowercase *a*'s Winston Churchills propped by a cane, her *m*'s the top of the Ten Commandments." However, as one ornate simile was piled on another, I began to feel like a dessert cart had toppled over on me. Some are strained: "Her flaws proliferated like the arms on Shiva.... Each flaw was a myriad cold blue hand"; "These thoughts... [resembled] the jellyfishlike lobes of an underwater plant, bloated, pallid." Some are baffling. This reader longed for some crisp, clean sentences.

First-person accounts of therapy are not plentiful. Although therapists often write about their cases to promote certain treatment methods, such accounts tell us little about the ways in which clients experience therapy. Some clients' accounts are intended to be didactic, such as Ann France's *Consuming Therapy*. Others capitalize on a trendy diagnosis, such as Jane Phillips' *The Magic Daughter*, a depiction of multiple personality disorder. But Friedman takes a different path, and for this she should be praised. Her book is not a brief for psychoanalysis. She has no diagnosis to flaunt, only ordinary miseries. Lying on Dr. Sing's couch, she inevitably seems myopic; her perspective reaches only as far as her stockinged feet. She often sounds self-absorbed, petulant and childish. Yet to undergo psychoanalysis is a humbling, uncertain and radical project. To compose a portrait of the experience is an act of courage, and to share the portrait an act of generosity.

# Inside the revolution

*by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz*

**The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War**

by Gioconda Belli, translated by Kristina Cordero with the author. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, 380 pp., $25.00 hardcover.

Like many other North Americans and other "internationalistas" from Latin America, Japan and Western Europe, I spent a lot of time during the Reagan years either in Nicaragua or organizing solidarity against the Contra war. Following the July 1979 Sandinista Revolution that dislodged the Somoza dictatorship and its cruel National Guard from power, activists from the sixties movements along with a new generation of anti-imperialists, including huge numbers of North American lesbian and gay activists, flooded Nicaragua in response to the Sandinistas' call for international brigades to assist with a literacy program and help rebuild the war-torn and impoverished nation of 2.5 million people.

I didn't get to experience that first euphoric moment. Within a year the United States government, led by Jimmy Carter, began its project to banish the Sandinistas and to restore Somocismo without Somoza, who was assassinated in his Paraguayan exile in June 1980. By the time I visited the new Nicaragua in May 1981, three months into the Reagan administration, his campaign promise to overthrow the "communistic terrorists" in Nicaragua was well under way. On my second trip to Nicaragua in December 1981, the (sole) Nicaraguan airliner that I was waiting to board in the Mexico City airport blew up in our faces. It was the first admitted act of terrorism by the quickly assembled former Somoza guardsmen in Honduras under the aegis of the US embassy, soon to be headed and controlled by John Negroponte (now US ambassador to the United Nations).

I spent most of the next seven years in the northeastern war zone of Nicaragua, monitoring the vicious Contra war and its human rights violations, reporting back in the US and to the United Nations' human rights bodies. I spent little time in the western interior or the capital, Managua, so I never met many of the brilliant Sandinista leaders, including Gioconda Belli.

But by 1970, years before the revolution, I knew of Belli's work—prize-winning feminist poetry and fiction. She was the first Nicaraguan woman writer proudly to write erotic verse that shocked the establishment. It was poetry and feminism that led Belli to join the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), as she began leading a double life outside her bourgeois marriage and motherhood in semi-clandestine Managua bohemia.

Now Belli has treated us to a literary memoir that reads like the best fiction. Many memoirs, even penned by the finest of writers, fall short as literature due to the constraints involved in truth-telling about oneself and, even more so, about friends and family. Belli's memoir is so open, truthful and generous in spirit that one forgets or finds it hard to believe that the author is the protagonist.

Belli takes seriously the feminist slogan, "The personal is political," and moves through her coming to consciousness, revolutionary ventures and feminist failings, making connections and self-criticism rarely found in revolutionary memoirs—Emma Goldman and Elaine Brown being notable exceptions, although neither claimed to be a great writer. She exhibits no bitterness, no vindictiveness or self-righteousness. Nor does she apologize for the revolution or regret her historical role in it.

In some ways, Belli's story is a collective memoir, reflecting the experience of thousands of professional and upper-class young women and men who abandoned their privileged lives to join what was, at its base, a mass peasant-worker movement. It resonates with the experiences of the critical mass of women who became Sandinistas—nearly half the combatants and clandestine activists by the time of the revolution.

The Sandinista revolution was not the only national insurgency to coincide with the Women's Liberation Movement. In southern Africa, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe won their freedom through guerrilla warfare during the second half of the 1970s. The Iranian, Afghan and Grenadian revolutions took place at the same time that the FSLN came to power in Nicaragua. But the FSLN was the first successful revolution consciously to recruit and incorporate self-proclaimed feminists into its ranks. Women like Gioconda Belli, Nora Astorga, Sofia Montenegro, Daisy Zamora and dozens of others attribute their revolutionary consciousness (anti-imperialist and pro-working class) to their new-found feminist consciousness. Once inside the FSLN, they were not willing simply to serve coffee and male sexual appetites or to crank the mimeograph machine. These women also brought a feminist consciousness to the poorer women they worked with. This was one of the reasons that thousands of North American and Western European feminists were drawn to support the Sandinistas.

Belli convincingly argues that there would not have been a triumphal revolution in Nicaragua without the women, and specifically without a feminist consciousness that allows women to fulfill their powerful potential. Perhaps more controversially to those identified with the revolution, she argues that a fatal flaw that contributed to the FSLN's 1990 electoral defeat was the systematic exclusion of women from top leadership positions in government, foreign policy and the military. She does not deny that the US-sponsored Contra war—dubbed "low-intensity warfare" by its designers—whittled away support for the FSLN as the government was forced to impose the draft, rationing, censorship and curtailment of civil liberties. Even by 1983, the entire population (including foreign supporters like me) was exhausted, sleep-deprived, in constant danger of death and afraid of what appeared to be an imminent full-scale aerial bombing of Nicaraguan cities by the US military. "I will never cease to be appalled at the utterly venomous, unwarranted manner in which the United States acted toward a tiny country that simply tried to do things its own way, even if this meant making its own mistakes," Belli writes.

The saddest section of the book is Chapter 55, in which Belli recalls her grief at the Sandinistas' electoral defeat. She had been disgusted with the FSLN's electoral campaign:

> I watched the advertising on television in disbelief, wondering how they could have put together such an incredibly tactless, obnoxious campaign, complete with rock and roll music. While people mourned so many young kids who had died in the war, while they endured hunger and terrible hardships, the FSLN's propaganda conveyed such a festive atmosphere... (p. 355)

Belli, like most Sandinistas, believed the FSLN would win, and that with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Reagan out of office, perhaps the Cold War rationale for ousting the Sandinistas would halt and the short-lived democracy of the revolution could return to Nicaragua. But it was not to be.

> My desolation filled with the presence of all my dead friends, but this time the feeling was devastating. I felt they were dying again, dying in vain, their deaths futile, their lives wasted. So many lives had been lost. And now there were more. With the counterrevolution, the death toll was up to fifty thousand. And it had to end like this! (p. 358)

*The Country Under My Skin* is the ultimate insider's view of a revolutionary process. In his rave review in the *New York Review of Books* last November, *New York Times* correspondent Stephen Kinzer, who covered Sandinista Nicaragua for the *Times* and knew Belli well when she was the FSLN press secretary, writes that it's "not really an insider's account... No woman will ever be able to write such an account, because no woman was ever admitted to the Sandinista elite." I disagree with that view. Before the FSLN came to power and for three years after, Belli was the companion of Henry Ruíz (she uses his *nom de guerre*, Modesto), one of the nine members of the all-male National Directorate. The relationship is straight out of Robin Morgan's *The Demon Lover*, an obsessive, humiliating and self-destructive affair from which Belli finally liberated herself and the feminist ideals she had sacrificed. She writes:

> I didn't know how to be alone. I had exposed myself to bullets, death; I had smuggled weapons, given speeches, received awards, had children—so many things, but a life without men, without love, was alien to me, I felt I had no existence unless a man's voice said my name and a man's love rendered my life worthwhile. It was not a question of denying men a